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AUTHOR Kaestle, Carl F.
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ABSTRACT

A review of the development of literacy in American national life provides both a picture of two centuries during which the strong association of literacy with mainstream cultural values was largely unexamined and unchallenged, and a realization that illiteracy is inextricably related to problems of discrimination and alienation in the workplace, in commercial media, in persistent popular attitudes, and in various youth subcultures. Literacy can be studied historically in at least three different ways: by establishing trends in crude literacy; by moving beyond crude literacy to functional literacy; and by asking related questions about the purposes of literacy--its cultural content and its economic functions. Crude literacy statistics reveal that the relationship of schooling and literacy in America is not a simple cause and effect relationship, that literacy reflects social stratification and educational opportunity, and that the national illiteracy rate shrank from 20% in 1870 to less than 3% in 1940, with major population divergences appearing in white/black, native/immigrant, and North/South figures. There is a need for additional study of the extent, quality, and content of popular literacy and of the historical purposes of literacy as applied to its liberating or constraining effects on intellectual enrichment, political efficacy, and economic improvement. (AEA)

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The History of Literacy in America: An Introduction

Carl F. Kaestle

Professor of Educational Policy Studies
and History, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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In a recent book entitled The Literacy Hoax Paul Copperman writes that a sharp decline in primary academic skills over the past ten years has imperiled the nation. The functional illiteracy of some high school graduates, and poor language skills of many others, are, in his words, "harbingers of Huxley's brave new world, and Orwell's world of 1984."[1] The author's alarmist tone and the title of his book recall earlier exposés, like Albert Lynd's Quackery in the Public Schools (1950), Arthus Bestor's Educational Wastelands (1953), or Leonard Ayre Laggards in Our Schools (1909). Those of your who are involved in the field of adult basic education, or in the study of literacy, know that widespread functional illiteracy is nothing new in America; but it is still instructive to review briefly its continual rediscovery.

Estimates of adult functional illiteracy ranging from one in five to one in seven adults have been common in the 1970's, and the message has appeared in scholarly journals and agency reports as well as in the popular press. Nor does the illiteracy problem lie solely with adults. The National Right to Read organization determined in 1975 that 12.6 percent of 17-year-olds could not read at minimally adequate levels. Among their other findings were that 51 percent of these subjects could not determine the date a fine was due on a traffic ticket. In the sedate Harvard Educational Review David Harmon argued in 1970 that functional illiteracy was grossly understated by government education statistics. Harmon argued that as many as 50 percent of America's adults were functionally illiterate and that a first priority in the literacy effort was to persuade educators of that

fact.[2] But in that effort he has had many predecessors. In 1951 the reading expert William Gray had reached the same conclusion-- that half of our adult population was functionally illterate. A few years earlier George Henry had argued that one-third of the students in American high schools couldn't read textbooks, and the Army announced that 8 percent of all its inductees from 1943 to 1945 had been totally illiterate. The rate for black inductees was 31 percent. World War I results had made an even greater splash in the press: over one-fourth of all men examined were functionally illiterate in English.[3] Even before that war, however, government officials were worrying about illiteracy in terms no less apocalyptic than in Copperman's 1978 Literacy Hoax. Reacting to the 1910 U.S. Census, a Bureau of Education report in 1913 attempted to dramatize the number of illiterates in America in the following image:

> In double line of march, at intervals of 3 feet, these 5,516,163 illiterate persons would extend over a distance of 1,567 miles-- more than twice the distance from Washington City to Jacksonville, Florida. Marching at a rate of 25 miles a day, it would require more than two months for them to pass a given point. A mighty army is this, with their banners of blackness and darkness, and hopelessness-- too large for the safety of our democratic institutions, for the highest good of society, and for the greatest degree of material prosperity.[4]

The recognition of illiteracy as a major public problem, then, goes back at least to the early twentieth-century; since then periodic waves of publicity about the problem have characteristically warned of low productivity by illiterates in the economy, the dangers to political democracy from ignorant voters, and the failure of the

public schools to produce competent adults. The problem, critics have argued, is both dangerous and avoidable. Yet the illiteracy phoenix rises in the public press at least once a decade, looking as grim as ever.

This brief recitation of precedents may give us some skepticism about the uniqueness of the problem today, and I think it should. But a historian must try to give us something more than a sense of déja vu; and to say that the discovery of functional illiteracy is old stuff is not to argue that we should be complacent about it. A brief, selective introduction to the history of American literacy may provide some perspective on where we've been and how we got where we are.

Literacy can be studied historically in several different ways. For purposes of this brief paper, I shall distinguish three. First, we can try to establish trends in crude literacy. Crude literacy indicates whether a person can or cannot read and/or write, without regard to the level of skill or its usefulness. Second, we can move beyond crude literacy to functional literacy, considering the quality, or level, of skill. Third, we can ask a series of related questions about the purposes of literacy-- its cultural content and its economic functions. For each of these dimensions, historians would be interested in both the causes and the consequences of literacy.

There are numerous methodological and conceptual problems in studying literacy, even the crude literacy rates on which most historians have focussed. The only widespread evidence of crude literacy

prior to the mid-nineteenth century is the ability to sign one's name. The relationship between the ability to sign one's name and the ability to read cannot be determined precisely and is debated by historians. Moreover, it probably changed from place to place and from time to time. In early nineteenth-century England, for example, many educational reformers wished to teach the poor to read but not to write. Writing, they thought, was inappropriate for the lower classes because it would unsettle them and give them pretentions to better jobs. But no such distinction was made in America. The argument that either reading or writing was dangerous was almost completely lacking in America, except with regard to slaves.[5] Therefore the relationship between signature writing and reading ability is probably different in the two countries.

Despite these nuances, signature rates are a necessary starting point for studying literacy in the past. Professor Lockridge is a noted authority on both the methodological problems and the trends in signature literacy in the early modern West, so I shall leave detailed discussion of both of these matters to him.[6] (For reference, I have summarized some of the data in Figure 1, appended.) I shall just point out two broad lessons to be learned from crude literacy rates of the past two or three centuries. First, they illustrate the complex relationships between literacy and other broad historical processes. One example is the recent disagreement between Lawrence Stone and Roger Scofield about whether a rise in literacy preceded or followed the Industrial Revolution in England.[7] The issue is complex, and the outcome is more than just academic: scholars and

policy makers interested in developing nations wish to know more about the role of literacy in economic development. The English data seem to suggest that a substantial and somewhat rising crude literacy rate preceded the spurt of industrialization of the late eighteenth century, but that the bigger take-off in popular literacy followed later in the nineteenth century and was more a consequence than a cause of the profound economic shift. A similarly interesting research problem exists for America during the same period, roughly 1750 to 1850. Recent research indicates that a considerable rise in school enrollments, as well as in crude literacy, preceded rather than followed the creation of state free school systems in the American Northeast. In a forthcoming book on American literacy Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens argue that some of this literacy rise had to do with the creation of a reading public, through cheaper newspapers and books, and through the spread of subscription libraries.[8] As in the case of English industrialization, the relationship of schooling and literacy in America is not a simple cause and effect relationship. In the history of rudimentary literacy there are spurts and lags, and they are not always predictable, suggesting that the historic roots of literacy are complex and its purposes multiple.

A second, simpler lesson contained in crude literacy statistics is that literacy reflects social stratification and educational opportunity. Literacy is not possessed randomly; it is part of a structure that maintains sex, class, and racial discrimination. One gratifying thing about the history of literacy is the narrowing of some gaps between social groups; part of the challenge of today's illiteracy,

obviously, is that it remains disproportionately a problem of the poor, the non-white, and the immigrant.

I shall comment on the narrowing of some of these literacy gaps in a brief review of crude literacy trends in United States history. It would be nice if we had a firm figure from which to begin. How literate was the American population at the time of the American Revolution? Were we one of the most generally enlightened and highly educated societies in the world at the time? Was our Revolution begun, as some claimed, precisely because the American yeoman knew his letters, knew his rights, read his pamphlets, and reached for his musket? Literacy is a tricky and relatively new subject for historians, so it is not surprising that they disagree on the extent of signature literacy in America in the late eighteenth century, both because their samples differ, and because their general interpretations of American history differ. The most up-beat assessment is by Lawrence Cremin, in an analysis of some data from New York City, Philadelphia, Dedham, Massachusetts, and Elizabeth City, Virginia, data which, as a graduate assistant, I helped compile. Based on adult male signature rates of 82 percent in Philadelphia, 87 percent in New York, 91 in Elizabeth City, and 97 percent in Dedham, with female figures ranging from 67 to 78 percent, Cremin portrayed an America in which inclusive politics, expanded schooling, and widespread opportunity created "liberating" literacy.[9] Lockridge's picture is more modest-- his figures are lower, and he does not associate literacy with moderniation or personal liberation. Although 90 percent of his New England males could sign their names in 1790, only 68 percent of their male countrymen in

Virginia and Pennsylvania could sign, and the New England female rate for 1760 was 44 percent, up only about 12 percent in the entire preceding century. The most pessemistic estimate is given in the forthcoming book by Soltow and Stevens, based on army enlistment signatures that suggest a 75 percent male crude literacy rate in the North and only a 50 to 60 percent rate in the South in the late eighteenth century.[10] Because Cremin's towns may have been untypically enlightened, and because Soltow and Stevens's soldiers may have been disproportionately illiterate, let us go with Lockridge's middling figures. What do they mean? In comparative terms it puts New England males among the most highly literate groups in Western nations, along with Scots and Swedes. The Americans to the South, lagging considerably, were yet slightly more literate than contemporaries in England and considerably ahread of Frenchmen. We can imagine, for what it's worth, that the combined crude literacy rate for white males on the mainland colonies was in the neighborhood of 75 percent, much lower for women, and miniscule for blacks.

By 1840, when the U.S. Census first gathered figures on literacy, much had changed. Adult crude literacy, measured by asking people if they could read and write, was over 90 percent for white adults of both sexes, and by 1850, when separate aggregate figures were given for males and females, the literacy gap (which had been as high as 40 percent in late eighteenth-century New England) had shrunk to 5 percent for adult whites.[11] Because the 1850 data are for all females over 20 years old, they reflect educational opportunities stretching

back over several decades. No one has yet sufficiently explained the tremendous expansion of female literacy and education prior to the so-called "common school revival" of the 1840s and 50s. It seems to have resulted from a combination of expanded, cheap, district schooling and changing attitudes about the propriety and desirability of women's education. Why these attitudes changed is also not entirely clear, but it was related to the emergence of a concept that women would preserve the republic by training future citizens and managing efficient, virtuous families, an argument that begins with essayists of the Revolutionary generation and blossoms in the "cult" of domesticity of the early nineteenth century.[12] Thus, soaring female literacy, surely a liberating development in some regards, may have been fueled by an ideology of domesticity that deepened the differentiation of male and female roles and set strict limits on women's activities. At first glance paradoxical, this contrast is an illustration of the Janus faces of literacy-- at once liberating and constraining, sometimes differentially for different people, but also sometimes within the lives of individuals. We shall return to these complexities when we consider the purposes of literacy.

To complete the review of crude literacy as recorded in the U.S. Census (see Table 2, appended): the national illiteracy rate shrank from 20 percent in 1870 to less than 3 percent in 1940. Three major divergences appear in the Census figures: white-black, native-immigrant, and North-South. (Note that by the mid-nineteenth century, illiteracy was regarded as a social problem; figures are thus stated as the percent illiterate, not the percent literate.)

Literacy for slaves was severely proscribed by the slave codes, and the pre-Civil War U.S. Censuses considered slaves illiterate by definition. There was, of course, an undetermined amount of literacy among slaves, estimated by some scholars to be around 5 percent at the time of emancipation.[13] When the freed slaves were counted with other blacks and their stated literacy was tabulated in 1870, the combined illiteracy rate was 81 percent. The succeeding fifty years witnessed a decline in black illiteracy, to 23 percent in 1920, a dramatic shift, considering discrimination and inferior school resources; but we must remember that these are crude literacy figures. The gap in years of schooling and level of literary skills remained great between whites and blacks.

The gap between immigrant and native-born whites was never as abject as the white-black contrast. Twelve percent of foreign-born adults were illiterate in 1880, as compared with 9 percent of native-born adults. However, immigrant illiteracy remained almost constant for the next forty years because of the constant fresh supply of new immigrants, while illiteracy among native-born whites declined. This gap began to close after 1920, with immigration restriction and increased adult education.

North-South differences in literacy were very substantial in the nineteenth century, even when controlling for race; this gap began to narrow when southern states adopted free school systems in the late nineteenth century, although the well-known regional contrast persists in the twentieth century. Other historical correlations that scholars have documented include the association of illiteracy with rural

residence, high fertility, early marriage, illiterate parents, and poverty.[14]

Although studies based on census literacy statistics continued into the twentieth century, the crude literacy figures for the period after World War I are not very interesting. By 1920 black illiteracy had declined to 23 percent, and the overall national rate was only 6 percent. While crude literacy statistics in the twentieth century improved, they became more meaningless. The famous "Alpha" tests of army recruits in World War I dramatized the problem of functional illiteracy that had been masked by high crude literacy rates. Functional illiteracy gradually became the dominant theme in discussions of illiteracy. It became routine to place caveats about functional illiteracy in studies of crude literacy. Thus, Winthrop Talbot explained that his 1916 study of immigrant illiteracy overlooked millions of "near-illiterates," nor did it "take into account the many millions who can read and write, but seldom do." Similarly, Sanford Winston wrote in the introduction to his study of census illiteracy in 1920: "There is a high percentage of individuals who, while not classified as illiterates, lack facility in reading and writing."[15]

Although the existence of a large reservoir of functional illiteracy became increasingly apparent in the twentieth century, it was of course also true of earlier centuries. In any period, the technically literate ranged from near illiteracy to sophisticated language mastery. Although historians know very little about levels of literacy skill in the past, and they have devised no systematic means to study it, we must keep the problem in mind when we discuss

the relationship of literacy to major historical developments in education, politics, or the economy. It is possible that while crude literacy figures were level in a given period, the quality of literacy of particular groups, such as an elite or a middle class, was improving and could have had an effect on productivity, politics, or social relations.

Returning to my chronological starting point, the American Revolution, we may ask the functional literacy question. Who cares if 85 percent of the men in New England and 68 percent of the men in Virginia could sign their names? How many of them could read the sophisticated political tracts of the time? Some years ago I asked this question about a pamphlet called The Farmer's Letters, published in 1768 by John Dickinson of Philadelphia. Appearing both in newspaper and pamphlet form, the Farmer's Letters' publication record suggested that except for Paine's Common Sense it was the most widely read political work of the Revolutionary decades, so I set out to estimate how many people read it. Using a set of estimates of newspaper circulation, and some fairly conservative assumptions about how many people read each newspaper or pamphlet, I concluded that about 80,000 of the 400,000 white males over 16 years old in the mainland colonies had read these sophisticated political essays.[16] The figure is no more than an educated guess, but if true, it indicates the magnitude of high level functional literacy, which we can compare to the crude literacy rate. If my figures are correct, and if Kenneth Lockridge's signature literacy figures are correct, they suggest that while perhaps 75 percent of the white males of the 1760's were technically literate,

at least 20 percent were sophisticated readers. Indeed, that proportion may actually have all read a particular document, a finding which suggests a quite large reading elite.

Perhaps similar research could sketch out some of the relations between functional and crude literacy in other periods, but the data are thin, and solid estimates are not to be expected until one reaches well into the twentieth century, when research on functional levels of literacy first appeared. For the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, we need more work on the spread of cheap newspapers and books, of participation in libraries and lyceums, of the language skills needed to read textbooks or popular fiction, and of the different modes and uses of literacy. There are specialized works on many aspects of print culture, but no one has brought them together in a study of the extent, quality, and content of popular literacy.[17] Such a study would necessarily deal not only with levels of crude and functional literacy but with the third concern I stated at the outset-- the historical purposes of literacy. This concern involves the most difficult questions, but it elevates the study of literacy from number-grubbing to social interpretation. In this brief paper I can only suggest what some of the questions are, and some tentative answers suggested by scattered evidence.

The most pervasive question is whether literacy has been liberating or constraining. The answer, of course, is "both," but the details, and the relative emphasis in different periods, are of great importance. While the power and freedom gained from the ability to read are rather obvious as a general proposition, literacy also introduces

people to norms and traditions that shape their lives. It may be useful for present-day educators and librarians to contemplate the historical purposes of American literacy when facing problems, for the problems of illiteracy are not merely problems of financial resources, pedagogical technique, and motivation. Literacy is not neutral.

Political and educational leaders of the early American republic had no doubts that literacy should be as widespread as possible. They did not share their English contemporaries' fears of popular education. Elite English conservatives, voicing widespread anxiety, warned that if you taught the poor to read the Bible, they might also read seditious literature and trashy novels, or, as I put it in an earlier analysis, if you teach a man to read in order that he may know his place, he may learn that he deserves yours.[18]

In America this strain of conservatism did not exist. Advocacy of widespread literacy was enhanced by inclusive politics for males, Calvinist religion, a smaller class of outright poor people, and a high literacy base to start with, especially in New England. Literacy, colonial American leaders believed, was not only desirable but necessary, both for salvation in the next world and proper behavior in the present. If we label them "conservative," it is because they desired to conserve their religion, conserve their traditions, and conserve social stability through literacy, and this is quite the opposite policy of conservatives in England, who feared popular literacy.

The union of religious doctrine and rudimentary literacy is illustrated by the alphabet couplets of the New England Primer: "In

Adam's fall, We sinned all. Heaven to find, the Bible mind. Christ crucify'd, for sinner dy'd. The Deluge drown'd, the earth around."[19] This popular text survived into the eighteenth century, when it was superseded by less doctrinal but no less moralistic texts. Surviving copybooks from the late eighteenth century also display a combination of moral platitudes with literacy, this time with penmanship. George Cleveland, a student in a Salem school of the 1790's, wrote:

"Love Your Enemies ABCDE
Love Your Enemies FGHIJ"

and, nine times each:

"Money is the root of all evil
Avoid Bad Company ABC
Misery's the Fruit of Vice"

Hannah Cook, a student in the same town a few years later, penned:

"Innocency is the greatest Felicity
Let thy Conduct be Prudent"

She made it to the end of the alphabet with this line:

"Xenophon accounted the Wise Man Happy, XYZ"[20]

Educators and missionaries in the American cities of the early nineteenth century reached out to poor and immigrant children and offered them literacy in return for acquiescence in a pan-Protestant morality. To get free schooling in the first half of the nineteenth century was virtually synonymous with accepting the King James Bible as one's textbook. Beyond the Bible, official mainstream morality pervaded schoolbooks, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Long before historians of American public schooling called

attention to the culturally abusive nature of early urban schools, students of nineteenth-century school textbooks were virtually unanimous: from McGuffy's readers, to Webster's spellers, to Morses' geographies, children learning to read and write were bombarded with messages that were Protestant, nationalist, nativist, racist, and vigorously pro-capitalist. Early twentieth-century immigrants found the same strings attached to English literacy in America, though thousands accepted it anyway, working their way through reading lessons about the virtues of soap and the rewards of getting to work on time.[22] As the sociolinguist Joshua Fishman wrote, "American nationalism came to stand for all that was modern, good, reasonable, inclusive, and participationist in human relations . . . it overpowered the masses of immigrants whose primordial ethnicity was still largely intact and, therefore, still largely innocent of ideology."[23] Despite the Statue of Liberty and the melting pot metaphor, official American culture never had a very serious component of cultural pluralism. Literacy and learning in America have been historically linked with a particular set of values about morality, ethnicity, and the political economy. That America is not unique among nations in this use of literacy does not necessarily make it a desirable or necessary policy for the future.

But the history is more complicated than my sketch thus far implies. The agents of official culture-- school teachers, social workers, Protestant ministers, librarians, and others-- were not members of a conspiracy. Official culture was neither so monolithic

nor so powerful that it simply devoured half-willing clients and spat them out, denuded of their culture. Two qualifications must be made. First, there were in the past, as there are today, diverse workers in childhood and adult education who were not giving the official message, who were tolerant and supportive of all of their students, who were sometimes moderately subversive, and who were often themselves from immigrant, poor, and nonwhite families. Leonard Covello, the famous Italian-American teacher and principal in New York City, is a prominent example of a persistent, practical-minded pluralist in the public schools; how many more unsung heroes of this type taught literacy at the juncture of American culture and immigrant ethnicity we shall never know, although more research certainly can and ought to be done on the history of actual behavior in classrooms.[24] Men and women like Covello could not change the basic rules of American culture, but they could make the process of acquiring literacy less abusive, they could channel students into opportunities, and they could support an ideal of biculturalism in contrast to the official print culture.

A second qualification is that native, Protestant, white institutions did not have a monopoly on literacy and print culture. While official institutions equated Protestant, middle-class, white, native culture with "American" culture and then purveyed it to vast numbers of outsiders, there were some alternatives. The history of black education, for example, is not simply the history of racism and paternalism by whites; there were indigenous black educational efforts

during slavery, as well as in the antebellum North, and then during Reconstruction and beyond. Roman Catholics, doctrinally and culturally alienated, created the largest alternative schooling system in American history. The immigrant press helped maintain bilingualism and represented views in contrast with the native press, and sometimes in contention with immigrant churchmen. Private schooling, immigrant and non-white religion, dissenting literature-- all have provided alternative entrees to literacy. The diversity of American life is no myth, and this applies to literacy as well.

Despite these two general caveats, the historic association of literacy and mainstream values has been a phenomenon to be reckoned with by most "outsiders" in our society. Many remained resistant or ambivalent; many others willingly embraced and emulated the values heralded as most truly American. Did it pay off? Did literacy, with all its cultural trappings lead to acceptance, skills, promotions-- in short, to economic success? This is a difficult and very debatable question for historians, and they are hampered by thin evidence. The utterly illiterate, of course, have been characteristically poor, but they were a small number quite far back in our history, and have been shrinking constantly. About levels of functional literacy we know less. Education enthusiasts from Horace Mann to the present have claimed that education pays off for individuals. Although Mann's principal justifications for public schooling lay elsewhere, he did claim that differences in wages correlated to different levels of education, on the basis of questionnaires to manufacturers.[25] The same theme persisted in the Progressive era, when anxiety about the

dangers of illiterate immigrants was no less than in the 1840s. Winthrop Talbot, writing for the Bureau of Education in 1916, sounded the dual themes of literacy for industrial stability and individual worker advancement:

> In industrial organizations, illiteracy results in ignorance of essential information and important work directions, and this causes misunderstanding and friction. It is noteworthy that industrial centers characterized by a high percentage of illiterates are especially subject to costly and prolonged labor difficulties; notable examples have been Lawrence, Massachusetts, Paterson, New Jersey, and the Colorado mining districts . . . .
> Wage worth is determined mainly by intelligence. . . the more illiterate and untrained the worker, the less his ability to realize the reasons and remove the causes of his own lack of employment or low and stationary wage. . . .[26]

The reality that lay beneath these slogans is difficult to guage. It is likely that a wage value for literacy and learning existed for more people in America's high industrial period, starting in the late nineteenth century, than in Horace Mann's day. For in the initial stages of industrialization, manufacturing work, which was absorbing more and more workers, did not require more skills, but fewer.[27] Furthermore, low wages put pressure on parents to use their children's labor to augment family income. The opportunity costs of education were high. In Stephan Thernstrom's study of early industrial Newburyport, the most typical kind of social mobility among workers was limited property mobility-- achieved by stringent underconsumption, utilizing child labor, saving a bit of money, and moving to a slightly better residence.[28] In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the labor force did develop more avenues for skill and high levels of

functional literacy. The service sector expanded, providing more jobs in teaching, social work, and other government work, alongside continued growth in traditional commercial and financial sector jobs like clerking and accounting, plus a more differentiated and hierarchical work force in manufacturing. Some economic historians have even claimed that skill (measured partly by literacy), and not discrimination, led to differential industrial wages among immigrant groups and between immigrants and natives.[29] The evidence is inconclusive, and I remain skeptical, but I shall leave technical analysis of such matters to economists like Professor Bowles, who knows a great deal about skills and discrimination in the workplace.

Aside from economic pay-off, there can be other individual benefits from literacy, such as intellectual enrichment, or political efficacy. Perhaps the most dramatic examples of the power of literacy lie in the history of slaves, from whom literacy was so assiduously withheld. Slaves learned to read and write despite beatings and maiming for the offense. Literate slaves could forge passes, become religious leaders, or read abolitionist tracts that supported their personal knowledge of injustice. Frederick Douglass's autobiography recounted his discovery that literacy meant power. Douglass's owner was lecturing his wife not to teach the boy the alphabet:

> 'A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do . . . . If you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.'

"These words," said Douglass, "sank deep into my heart."

> I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty-- to whit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.[30]

Again, we see that literacy has been liberating as well as constraining for individuals in American history. Douglass's experience notwithstanding, however, for the outsiders in American history-- the poor, the black, the immigrant, and women in general--the cultural price of literacy has been substantial and the payoff uncertain. Whatever it has done for individuals, the cultural core of American literacy has probably served the purpose of social stability it was aimed at. It also may have served in the long run-- gradually, painfully, and partially-- to broaden the ethnic and racial inclusiveness of American institutions, at the same time many of its agents sought to transform their clients into models of mainstream behavior and belief.

The trend in the recent past among many educators, literacy workers, and government officials, has been toward cultural pluralism, as evidenced by bilingual education programs, more culturally neutral teaching materials, affirmative action, and relativism in the study of dialects like black English. There has been a retreat from the moralism and ethnocentrism of language training in the past. I see two main problems with this hopeful development, and since I leave my scanty expertise behind when pronouncing about current policy, I shall be brief. First, there are real questions as to how far down in our institutions the new conventional wisdom has filtered. The identity of English literacy with a constellation of cultural values

has been pervasive and durable. How many teachers have stopped being moralistic about standard English? How many of the revised, nonracist, nonsexist beginning reading texts have actually reached America's classrooms? Is the problem just lag time, or is there a reservoir of resistance out there that will not go away?

More important, even if we succeeded in bringing effective, tolerant, and unmoralistic skill training to all who want and need it, we would leave unsolved many of the problems faced by the groups who tend to be functionally illiterate. In other words, there are limits to what teachers, librarians, and government officials can do. Some of the problems of discrimination, alienation, and inarticulate lives lie in the workplace, some in the commercial media, some in persistent popular attitudes, some in various youth subcultures. We must do what we can in our own spheres of professional activity, for functional illiteracy can be crippling in and of itself. But we must realize that illiteracy is related inextricably to other problems of American society.

History does not provide answers to complex social problems. In the case of literacy, history provides a picture of two centuries of American national life during which the strong association of literacy with mainstream cultural values was largely unexamined and unchallenged. If that connection is now being examined, not just by a few academics and people in Washington, but by the popular press, by workers in education, by leaders from different cultural groups, and by learners themselves, then that is some cause for encouragement.

Whether this progress will help solve the problems of functional illiteracy remains to be seen, but it is a more important problem to be working on than the decline in college entrance test scores.

NOTES

1. Paul Copperman, The Literacy Hoax (New York, Morrow, 1978), p.24.

2. Helen H. Lyman, Literacy and the Nation's Libraries (Chicago, American Library Association, 1977), preface, p. 5; Charles J. Gadway, Functional Literacy: Basic Reading Performance: A brief summary and highlights of an assessment of 17-year-old students in 1974 and 1975 (Denver, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1977), pp. 15, 17; David Harmon, "Illiteracy: An Overview," Harvard Educational Review 40 (May, 1970), 229-30, 237.

3. Mitford M. Matthews, Teaching to Read Historically Considered (Newark, Del., International Reading Association, 1934), 145-6; Samuel Goldberg, Army Training of Illiterates in World War II (New York, Teachers College Bureau of Publications, 1951), pp. 66-7; Eli Ginzberg and Douglas W. Bray, The Uneducated (New York, Columbia University Press, 1953), pp. 62-3.

4. United States Bureau of Education, "Illiteracy in the United States and an Experiment for its Elimination," Bulletin No. 20,1913, p.7.

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TABLE 1: APPROXIMATE COMPARATIVE LITERACY: MALE ADULTS

	England	Scotland	France	Sweden	New Eng.	Virginia	Pennsylvania
1650	45	33		30	61	50	
1700		55	29	60	69	67	
1750	63	75	35	90	80	63	66
1800	62	88	54		90	68	68
1850	68	89	60				
1900	97	98	95				

TABLE 2: ILLITERACY IN THE U.S. CENSUS

1840 – 1940

YEAR	ALL U.S.	WHITES Native-born	WHITES Foreign-born	WHITES All whites	BLACKS	MALES (ALL RACES)	FEMALES (ALL RACES)	WHITE MALES	WHITE FEMALES
1840 (ages 20+)				9.0					
1850 (· ·)		10.0	15.2	10.7					
								9.3	12.4
1860 (· ·)		7.8	15.0	9.0				6.6	10.1
1870 (ages 10+)	20.0			11.5	81.4	18.3	21.9		
1880	17.0	8.7	11.8	9.4		15.8	18.2		
1890	13.3	6.2	13.1	7.7	57.1	12.9	14.4		
1900	10.7	4.6	12.9	6.2	44.5	10.1	11.2		
1910	7.7	3.0	12.7	5.0	30.4	7.6	7.8		
1920	6.0	2.0	13.1	4.0	22.9	6.0	5.9		
1930	4.3	1.5	9.9		17.5				
1940	2.9	1.1	9.0		11.5				

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